

It's Not Just a Job, It's a Profession

We know that early childhood education is critical. We have the data, we know the science. Yet pre-K teachers are often thought of not as professionals, but as babysitters. The pay is low; teachers often don't need college degrees. The quality of programs and centers is varied. What would it take to connect what we know with what we do and actually transform the profession?

STORY BY KATIE BACON

grams like the one at the Baldwin is becoming stronger and stronger over time. Over the past several decades, research has shown that good preschool programs for three- and four-year-olds can have significant positive effects on children's literacy, language, and mathematical skills; and on their ability to regulate themselves and interact successfully with peers. Two important decades-long longitudinal studies, the Carolina Abecedarian and Perry Preschool Projects, have shown effects not just on academic skills but on life outcomes. The students enrolled in these intensive programs, over time, have been more likely to complete school, have earned higher wages, and have been less likely to commit crimes or use drugs.

Policymakers and researchers, including those at the Ed School's Saul Zaentz Early Education Initiative, are also coming to understand that the early childhood years, before children go to kindergarten, represent a "sensitive" period when children's brains are both more receptive to positive learning environments and more vulnerable to negative experiences than at any other time. However, in a 2007 paper put out by the Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University and the National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, the authors highlighted "a persistent tolerance in our society for poor-quality care and education in the early childhood period" even though "research shows that staff knowledge and skills are among the most important determinants of the impact of early childhood programs."

As those words suggest, there's a wide gap between the importance of a high-quality education during the preschool years, the knowledge that teachers are the main drivers of quality, and the willingness of our society to invest in those teachers. As the Zaentz Initiative points out, only two in 10 children have access to a high-quality early education experience.

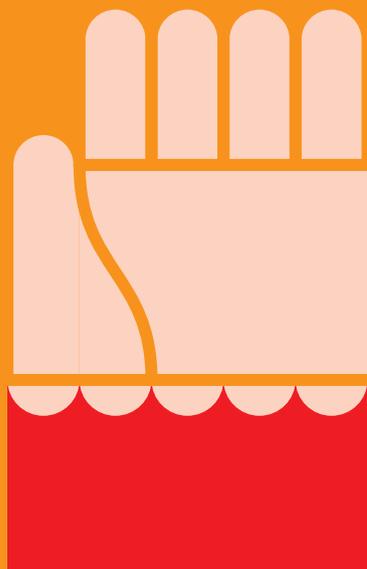
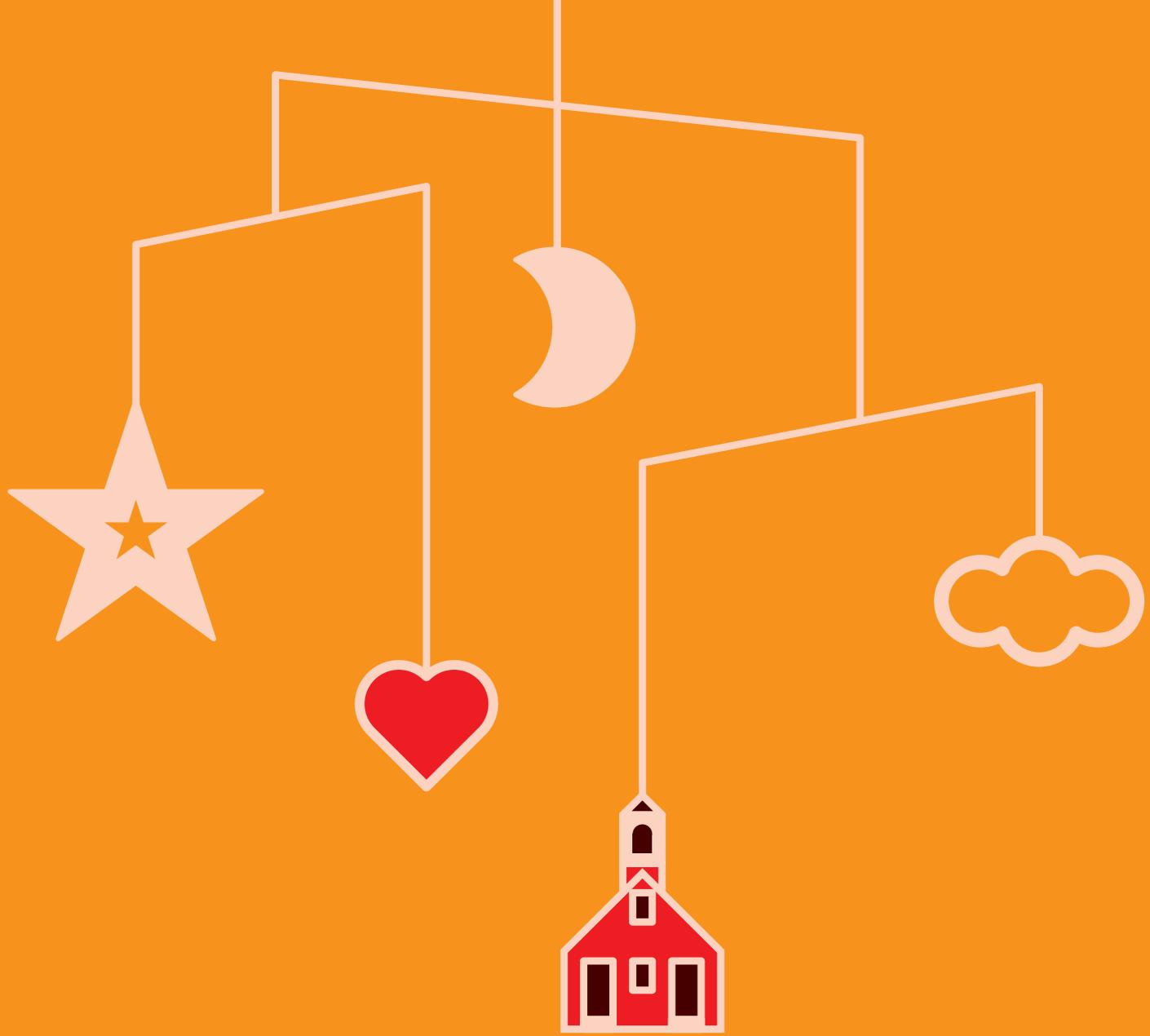
When it comes to salary, the median wage for all childcare workers is \$10.72 per hour, according to the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), and includes home care providers and preschool teachers in all settings. "These suppressed wages come at a significant cost to taxpayers," the organization reports. More than half — 53 percent — of workers in the industry receive public assistance of some kind to support their own families.

Meanwhile, in most states the only requirements for teaching young children are a high school degree and a background check. While there is debate over whether having a bachelor's degree should be required for early education teachers, experts agree that teachers do need a base of knowledge about brain development, along with many other skills, including the ability to teach using play, to

O N A FRIGID WINTER MORNING in Boston, a group of prekindergarteners gathered on a cozy rug in their bright classroom at the Baldwin Early Learning Pilot Academy, five of them pretending to be snowmen melting in the sun. All of them sang together: "Five little snowmen standing in a row, each with a hat and a big red bow. Out came the sun, and it stayed all day. One little snowman melted away." One child collapsed to the floor, mimicking a melting snowman, then crawled over to the rest of his classmates. The lead teacher asked them how many snowmen were left. "One! Two! Three! Four!" they shouted, punctuating each number by jumping in the air. "How many snowmen have melted?" "One!" The song continued.

Without fully realizing it, the children were practicing math skills and language skills through rhyming, all while having fun singing, jumping, and dancing. Even less obviously, the teachers were working with the children on social dynamics too — things like negotiating who got to be the last snowman standing. It was a small moment, but for the teachers, there was a lot backing up a scene like this one. All of the Boston Public Schools early education teachers have a set curriculum they can draw from. They receive coaching on that curriculum, professional development, and time to reflect on their practice with others — to figure out what's not working and how to adjust it.

The argument for high-quality preschool pro-



support children at different stages of development, and to spur the complex thinking and problem solving young children are capable of with the right scaffolding. As Rhian Evans Allvin, the CEO of NAEYC, puts it: “You can’t pluck someone off the street; they have to know how to capitalize on this phase of life. There’s a pedagogy for early learning that requires professional preparation.”

According to a 2016 report by the Center for the Study of Child Care Employment, “our system of preparing, supporting, and rewarding early educators in the United States remains largely ineffective, inefficient, and inequitable, posing multiple obstacles to teachers’ efforts to nurture children’s optimal development and learning, as well as risks to their own well-being.”

Or, as Lei-Anne Ellis, who is the early childhood director for the city of Cambridge, says, “You’re asking teachers to be educated on child development, on math and science, and to have enough background knowledge to feel comfortable teaching them to children. And you’re expecting them to clean up, do menu planning, and curriculum planning for peanuts. To me it verges on the insane. And yet, we know that the first three to five years are key to children’s development. If you believe that, why aren’t you giving the early educators better pay?”

Amy O’Leary, who directs Early Education for All, a campaign of Strategies for Children, and is president of the NAEYC governing board, agrees that there’s a gap between what the research tells us and what we’re willing to invest. “We as a society don’t believe the research because if we did, we would change the way we spend money. The brain development research is very strong,” she says.

But as she sees it, the public’s willingness to invest is slowly changing, in cities and states across the country. O’Leary pointed to a recent announcement by the governor of Rhode Island, Gina Raimondo, that pre-K was her issue and every four-year-old in the state could have a spot. “We didn’t hear governors saying those things before, so we certainly are climbing up a hill of public understanding, but I think we still have a long way to go.”

Katy Donovan, the director of Harvard University’s network of childcare centers, sees this gap with parents, too. “I want so hard to believe that there’s an increasing understanding of the value of quality early childhood, but for so many families, this is such a short-term problem,” she says. “It’s a three- to five-year problem: Who’s going to take care of the kids, who gets to go to work today.”

THE PRESCHOOL SYSTEM in the United States is diffuse, running the gamut from private programs with very low teacher-student ratios that cost upwards of \$2,000 a month, to free preschool educa-

tion built into local public school systems, to community-based preschools in the local YMCA, to a family program in a grandmother’s living room. Within that system, the quality of the programs varies widely.

Suzanne Bouffard, the author of *The Most Important Year: Pre-Kindergarten and the Future of Our Children*, and a former researcher at the Ed School, says that given the range and number of preschool programs state to state, “to some extent it’s impossible to answer how many kids are in the types of programs we’d like them to be in,” but points to two longitudinal studies that sampled programs over time in a range of different states. The basic takeaway, as she described it, was that there was “a small number of great programs, a small number of terrible programs, and most of the programs are somewhere in between, in the mediocre range.”

There are also radical differences in pay and benefits. Boston’s preschool teachers, for instance, are on the same pay and benefit scale as teachers in the K-12 system (\$59,100 for a first-year teacher with a master’s degree). By comparison, the median hourly wage for all preschool teachers in the state in 2017 was \$15.71 (71 cents more than the state’s new minimum wage).

Winifred Hagan, an expert in early childhood education who is an associate commissioner in Massachusetts’ Department of Higher Education, calls this bifurcated system “really problematic. In the public schools you can make a living wage and have benefits, but in the other systems you can’t; there’s no equity or parity. People are at poverty wages, which doesn’t exactly incentivize them to increase their qualifications.”

The current bifurcation of preschool grew out of a historical split between nursery schools and lab schools on the one hand, focused on educating young children for a few hours a day, and the childcare industry on the other, focused on providing parents with a place where their children could be while they worked. Hagan describes how this second category was tied into three social-welfare efforts when the government wanted to encourage women to enter the workforce: during World War II, when the men were off fighting; the War on Poverty, when Head Start was created; and the welfare to work movement of the 1990s. In all three cases, Hagan explains, the qualifications and wages of workers entering the childcare system were depressed, in order to create a larger pool of workers to choose from while keeping the cost of childcare down. Hagan sees a direct line from these policies to the bifurcated situation of today.

Over time, society’s expectations for what preschool can and should be have evolved more quickly than the early education system itself, explains Anita Moeller, the deputy commissioner for pro-

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gram administration in the Massachusetts Department of Early Education and Care. “When the state was supporting childcare through programs like welfare or WIC, it was so parents could go to work, not so children could learn. As we’ve learned more about the development of the brain and about the support families need, people’s understanding has grown, but the infrastructure hasn’t grown with it.”

Building a strong infrastructure is the goal of many in the field, as a way to buoy the lives and experiences of both children and teachers. One of the groups thinking strategically about how to transform the profession are the people at the Zaentz Initiative, led by Professors Stephanie Jones and Nonie Lesaux. They argue that while there’s significant data showing that high-quality early education can shape people’s lives in a positive way, there’s little science to guide us on the specific ingredients that lead to such care.

As a way to identify those ingredients, the Zaentz Initiative is conducting a population-based study of nearly 5,000 three- and four-year-olds and their childcare settings, a representative sample of all those in Massachusetts. Lesaux points out that while smaller studies have been done of formal settings such as the preschool classrooms within the Boston Public Schools, this study is the first of its kind in that its goal is to study the whole range of childcare settings.

“There’s been a series of small-scale studies of the very formal center, like the Boston Public Schools’ approach to doing it in classrooms. But if you think about it, it’s a little boutiquey,” she says. “The issue is that many kids are not even in those settings to begin with. So if we’re going to try to both improve and scale the system, at least the research needs to reflect the kinds of places where kids actually are.”

At a time when many states and cities are working to radically expand their systems for early childhood education, including Massachusetts; Illinois; Washington, D.C.; New York City; and Denver, Lesaux argues that “you need to link the science to the policy in order to get this right.” But right now, she continues, “the expansion plans are really missing the improvement piece, which is, how do we do this really well, and when we expand, how do we simultaneously improve on this?”

In a December 27, 2018, piece for *The Washington Post*, Jones and Lesaux described the kind of features they’re trying to identify with the study. “What types of caregiver-child interactions and routines promote young children’s early social-emotional growth across all of the different setting types?” they write. “And how do caregiver competencies such as their use of language and their ability to manage their own emotions impact children’s growth and development? In turn, how might what we learn about these features — the critical ingredi-

ents — inform scalable solutions that best complement our nation’s rich cultural, linguistic, economic, and programmatic diversity?”

Many experts believe that the key to raising the level of early education lies in thinking carefully about how you elevate it to a true profession.

“I don’t think that the world has yet fully understood or embraced the idea that to get to a system that actually works, that lives up to the science and works for families, that we have to take an approach that is about professional support and professionalizing the workforce,” Jones says. “There’s still a kind of ‘let’s get the right curriculum for the kids’ as opposed to ‘let’s build the right system for adults who have the competencies to do the work.’”

She explains that the Zaentz Initiative’s approach to building teachers’ competencies is to train and develop leaders in the field (directors of centers or groups of centers, policymakers, and others who influence the working conditions of educators) in the science of early learning and how to apply it to early learning settings. “If you are trying to build capacity, individual teacher by individual teacher, you would be making an important but tremendous investment in a very piecemeal approach. But if you target leadership and strategic decision-making, you are influencing the system through a funnel that potentially reaches many, many more and has a little bit more durability or sustainability in the system.”

Allvin, CEO of NAEYC, agrees that a major tool for raising the quality of the system is to address the status of the adults who teach in it. “The floor of quality should be such that parents can choose from either high quality or high quality. Right now, the cost, wages, and quality all don’t match up. There’s great evidence that quality really matters, that it really differentiates outcomes. And having a professionalized workforce is key to that quality.”

WHAT WOULD BUILDING the right system for adults mean in practice? What would raising up the profession mean? One widespread idea is that in order to be really recognized as a profession, the field needs to have an overarching structure, with accessible and clear “on-ramps” to different levels. In the field of medicine, for instance, doctors, physicians assistants, nurses, medical assistants, and more all work in the same place, but they get to their positions by following different pathways, which are well-defined and carefully regulated. The exact training they need for each level is clearly delineated and transferrable from place to place within the United States.

For early childhood education on a national level, for example, NAEYC is working on a program called Power to the Profession, in which teachers

could be certified at three different levels, drawing from the same core competencies but at different depths. In Massachusetts, Hagan pointed to the state's Career Pathways Grant encouraging community colleges to expand offerings in professional development and certification — in other words, to “figure out on-ramps” for those in the field. One such on-ramp would be a coordinated pathway to an associate's degree in early education, which would involve a handful of online courses in foundational topics that would be accessible and affordable for people in the field.

Two cities in Massachusetts have been testing out programs that expand access to high-quality programs while providing more professional supports for teachers than they otherwise would have, as well as drawing some outside funding into the system. Cambridge is in the third year of a pilot program through which families are offered need-based scholarships to private preschools in the city. As part of the program, the centers may sign on for their teachers to receive a significant amount of professional development, including free classes, helping them to work their way up in the field. In its first year, Cambridge gave 23 scholarships to children at eight different centers. Next year, the program will expand to 60 students at 16 sites.

Ellis, who is running the program for the city, points out that “what we do around the professionalization of the field is quite unique in the sense of we give people the coaching, the mentoring, the communities of practice, and free professional development.” It's one small way of addressing a large systemic problem and offers a model for how people can advance in the field in a way that's both affordable and accessible.

Donovan, with Harvard University's network of childcare centers, which are part of the scholarship pilot program, argues that offering a path for professional advancement benefits not just the teachers but the students as well.

“I know so many people who have said, ‘I would stay forever if I could.’ Finding a way to sustain our workforce would allow us to increase quality all over the place. If I could find a teacher and train him or her and have him stay, that option is so much stronger than having people come in and come out,” she says.

Christina Denis, who is a quality coach in the Cambridge program and formerly directed a center, talked about the important role of ongoing professional development in the classroom.

“I think one of the biggest things we emphasize to our teachers is that the only way we're going to get there in terms of feeling like this is a profession is to treat it that way ourselves,” she says. “If teachers don't get that opportunity for professional development, all they have at the end of the day is

their own ability to self-reflect and say, ‘okay what happened in my day today? How can I improve on that tomorrow?’ And you need skills to be able to do that. Because it can be challenging.”

The city of Boston has gone a different route, creating a link between their well-established public preschool program and local community centers that provide childcare. Funded by a federal Preschool Expansion Grant, the program provides year-round tuition-free schooling for four-year-olds whose families live below the federal poverty line. The program has provided coaching, professional development, and, importantly, higher salaries for teachers while at the same time letting them draw on the curriculum, infrastructure, and expertise of Boston's well-regarded system.

According to Jason Sachs, executive director for early childhood in Boston Public Schools, the city is hoping to significantly expand the partnership. As he describes it, “We have two tracks: Some community centers are ready to work with us. Others, we'll make an investment in raising the quality through professional development and leadership training, working with the University of Massachusetts and other schools to help provide that education.”

Sachs recognizes that public preschool programs may not be right for all children — for instance, parents may need more childcare hours or want a smaller setting for their children. But the goal is that the quality of the experience is consistent. “If the child is not going to go to the Baldwin [School] and their family chooses Head Start, we should make sure that Head Start offers the same quality experience. That's the commitment.”

There are several arguments, from both the family perspective and the worker perspective, for a mixed-delivery system, drawing on many types of settings. While public schools provide a strong infrastructure and can support higher levels of pay, most public school principals don't have experience in early education, and the pressure that public schools feel to teach to the test can filter down even to the preschool level, to the detriment of young children's learning experiences.

“Principals are under a lot of pressure to prove that children are producing outcomes,” Sachs says. “So they look for the easy things for children to produce. If you ask kids important questions, give them the room, time, and space to really provoke their thinking in meaningful ways, they produce great stuff, but teachers need time to document it, and it's not in the form of quick, constrained skills.”

In addition, while it's obviously good that public preschools are able to pay teachers at a higher level, that pay level pulls teachers from other parts of the system as teachers with bachelor's degrees migrate toward the higher-salaried jobs.

Ellis says of her experience working with centers

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in Cambridge, “In our 15 sites, there are three programs looking for teachers of three- to five-year-olds; they can’t find them with a BA willing to work for this salary. You raise the quality of our teachers and you lose them, so there’s high turnover.”

Lastly, early education workers, particularly those who work in community-based centers, are more diverse than any other group of educators in the United States. Maintaining and creating a vibrant ecology of high-quality community-based care is one way to support this vulnerable part of the workforce.

As Bouffard explains, “There’s a really valuable and vital workforce of people, mostly women, staffing those community centers who are reflective of the communities they serve, so a lot of them are not necessarily college-educated; many come from low-income backgrounds; many are immigrants; many have a primary language other than English. And we don’t want to unintentionally decimate that workforce.”

Hagan agrees and argues that part of finding a workable solution to the problems in our childcare system will be building an educational system that takes these workers, their needs, and their skills into account.

“We don’t want to change the tremendous asset of the diversity of this workforce. They are a good match for our youngest citizens,” she says. “We don’t want to put up standards that serve as barriers. Instead, we should focus on competency-based education and being able to assign a value to what people already know and do.”

Policymakers in this space talk about the “childcare trilemma” — trying to find that very difficult balance of quality, compensation, and affordability. “It’s a three-legged

stool,” Denis explains. “You want teachers to get paid well, parents can only provide so much, so the third leg is the quality piece.”

Many argue that the only way to provide high-quality care in a consistent way is to subsidize the system, whether through local funds, state funds, or federal funds — or probably some combination of all three. As Allvin of NAEYC puts it, “What we know is that parents can’t pay more and educators can’t be paid less. We have to make a fundamental decision about the marketplace of early learning. If indeed our society wants kids to have a fair shot at

quality education, then we believe the public sector plays a role in that marketplace.”

Some, like Anita Moeller of Massachusetts’s Department of Early Education and Care, talk of how different the landscape would be if early childhood education were considered a right, as is K-12 education in this country.

“If early education was an entitlement, and if the funding was there to support it as such, we would be in a different place,” she says. “I sympathize with parents who try to support their kids as best they can; I sympathize with programs trying to support parents as best they can with what they have. We have to combine all our answers.”

Lesaux points out that there is already a good deal of public money and investment going into the system of early childhood education.

“Every year, across every state, millions of dollars are spent on childcare in one way or another, through the federal dollars and the state dollars,” she says. “They are pushing out licenses, pushing out grants to improve quality, pushing out workforce development to improve strategies, investing in more slots, more contracts, and more vouchers for low-income families.” It’s a matter of really understanding the marketplace and using the funds in a smart, strategic way.

But it also may be about drawing on new sources of funds. Hagan points out that businesses benefit when their employees have high-quality childcare to rely on, yet they are not asked to pay into the system. “This workforce really matters to the economic future of Massachusetts and the country,” Hagan says. “This industry makes a great deal of other work possible. There’s got to be a mechanism for the businesses and corporations that benefit to pay into the system.”

Wherever the funds come from, Amy O’Leary of Strategies for Children and NAEYC argues that there’s been an increasing awareness in her field that the way to strengthen the system is to focus resources on early educators themselves.

“The question is, if we spend more money to support educators, will we see better outcomes for children, more stability for families? And will this partnership between community-based programs and the public schools materialize?” she says. “And I would say yes, yes, and yes.”

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2017 Median Hourly Wage

\$10.72

FOR ALL
CHILDCARE
WORKERS

\$10.35

FOR HOME CARE
PROVIDERS

\$13.94

FOR PRESCHOOL
TEACHERS IN
ALL SETTINGS

\$22.54

FOR PRESCHOOL
TEACHERS IN
SCHOOLS ONLY



Source: National Association for the Education of Young Children